

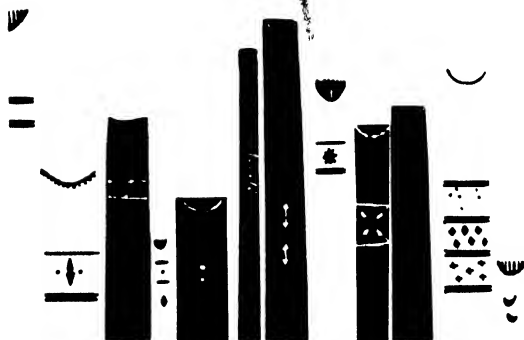
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John of the Cross,
Saint, 1542-1591. cn
The song of the soul,
1927.

THE SONG OF THE SOUL

By SAINT JOHN-OF-THE-CROSS, *Barefooted Carmelite; Doctor of the Church.* TRANSLATED by JOHN O'CONNOR, *Licentiate in Sacred Theology*



FRANCIS WALTERSON
CAPEL-Y-FFIN
ABERGAVENNY

1927

INTRODUCTION

John de Yepes of Old Castile, John-of-Saint-Matthias of Carmel, changed his name again into John-of-the-Cross when Saint Teresa had induced him to reconsider his plan of becoming a Carthusian, and to help her to re-establish the primitive observance of the Carmelite rule. This was when the spacious days of great Elizabeth were getting up an appetite for the gory breakfasts of York and Tyburn and Exeter and other places, the year of Our Lord fifteen hundred and sixty-eight, towards Christmas. Nine years later, again towards Christmas, he was seized by his religious, not ecclesiastical, superiors, and thrown into a stifling cell in Toledo, where he was treated with rigour and duress. The reason of all this was not the unreason or pique of the rulers and Scribes of Carmel, though a contemporary could have proved both to exist. No. In the first place John had been asking for it in the secrecy of his prayers, and in the second place he had refused to set his religious superiors above his ecclesiastical employers, an example not always inculcated among religious. It would be interesting and instructive to study in detail the actions of a canonized saint who was always in trouble for disregarding the prelates of his order in favour of the Apostolic Delegate and such persons.

In the Toledo cell he wrote The Song of the Soul, which he afterwards revised and completed. Later again, at the request of the Venerable Ann-of-Jesus, he wrote a full explanation of his Canticle ; full, if three hundred pages be deemed enough. He escaped from prison miraculously after nine months. I have not any detail of the escape, but the miraculous element seems admitted by his persecutors, who left him at large, just as Joseph and Nicodemus seem to have gone unmolested by the panic-stricken Sanhedrim.

In these days of universal culture, when democracy should flourish and does not, when committees are effective inversely as their numerosity and parliaments are a laughing-stock, it is thrilling to read that John's life was shortened by his resistance to the Carmelite General's enactment of a permanent Committee for the Government of the Order. These poets are a terrible temptation to wild asses of every tribe and tongue. They look so weak that it seems merely pleasant exercise to kick them to pieces, just as the Pope of Rome has always appeared to the Gentiles and their most or least Christian majesties, and last of all in these our days to their Omnipotent Committees. John died before his fiftieth year, and his Discalced Carmelites live. So does his mystic teaching, original yet orthodox, attractive and sound, tender and terrible. Just as none attains to perfect knowledge until his heart has been torn up by the roots (for roots must have earth and sensual traditions, and these matters darken counsel) so there are no short cuts or pleasant ways to share the Divine Nature—unless pain and durance vile be pleasant and the selfhood of a man be short-lived, whereas it is wont to be an unconscionable time dying. If to unite Himself with us meant that God should suffer and die, it cannot be otherwise for us when we seek the equivalent union with God. As to what this means, what is purchased when the right price is paid, Saint John, being a poet, is not afraid to tell, so far as words, which are a piecemeal thing, can adumbrate the Last Culmination of Intelligence, the Folly of Love, the Thought behind all thinking, and away beyond it evermore. So the new Song of Songs came to be carolled just when the sun of this world was eclipsed for John-of-the-Cross, and the great paradox included many small ones, supersensual delight expressing itself in sensuous transports of imagery, and overflowing into a humour best described as child's play: e.g., Aminadab is the Devil, and the cavalry are the natural feelings, which become spiritualized by the soul's mastery of the body, and the nymphs of Jewry are the same thing before this civilizing influence bears upon them.

It is open to those who have never been in Hell to be sure that no such

place exists, but it is not a certitude making for security. Many such cock-surenesses go on in the world to all appearance self-subsistent, and among them is the persuasion of good but stuffy people that Divine Love has no need of illustration or analogy from human love, least of all from sexual love ; nor will they allow the End for which we were made to compare in any regard with the consummation wherein we begin. However, when the mystic begins to be conscious of true union with the Divine he must needs know not only that all things are very good, but that all are very one. Saint John has secrets besides those which he unveils in this *Canticle*, and they help us to understand how as poets see into things while others see half round them, so mystics seeing God without veils are apt and wont thus to envisage His creatures also, and if they see God more nearly as He is in Himself it must follow that they see His creatures more approximately in their essences. Now this is the infirmity of our mind, that we do not behold the essence of anything but merely deduce that essence from such qualities as be manifest to our senses. It may be that much pain of both body and mind is needed for the purgation of this gross medium, this muddy vesture of decay which vitiates our vision and prejudices our imagination, but clarity once achieved, the hierarchical vision lies unoccult, rank under rank down-wheeling from the Throne, even to the bases of the pregnant ooze. And the pregnant ooze is not unclean in that all-benignant Throne-light. Compare the very common, not to say vulgar, execration of Father Faber's hymn on Our Lady's Expectation with Crashaw's epigram on the ante-natal life of our Life :

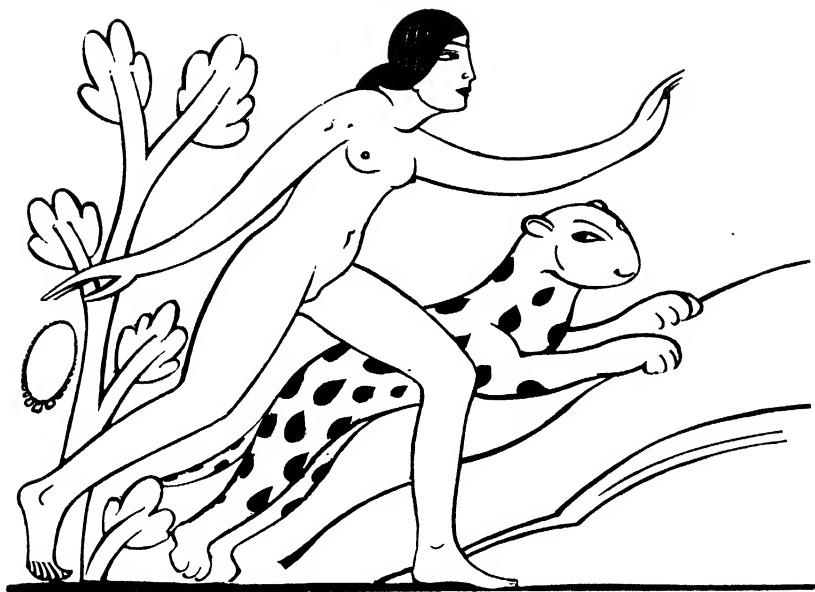
“ The conscious vitals move with quiet awe,
The wheels of ether know no holier law.”

One could sum up the endless controversy by saying that to the unclean some things are cleaner than others, whereas to the half-cleansed nothing is quite pure. Only to the wholly cleansed are all things clean, and wholly clean, and the imitation purity of Shelley is very sickening to those who apprehend the genuine article. None but one fresh from the nursery

of True Belief could write about the mystery that lures and sunders, grapples and thrusts apart, endears, estranges, since he first saw it as the symbol of that Divine Union which he already had coveted first, because he had heard of it first. It is good for a man when he has borne this yoke from his youth, for the other yoke is hard and heavy, and blinds the soul with clay, even more clay than it is native to.

One subtle and important hint is given in passing by Saint John in his explanation of the thirteenth verse : " Her Spouse gives her these raptures away from the body as 'twere a rehearsal of death and final union, but 'tis in a lower state none the less. . . . Great howsoever and high though His Self-giving be in this life, it is not consummate. . . . Note also how the Spouse not sayeth that He cometh to her flight but to the fanning of her pinions, because God giveth Himself not through the soul's own flight or knowledge she hath of God, but by the love of the knowledge. For knowledge is not union whereas love is union."

JOHN O'CONNOR



THE BRIDE

Ah! Where art Thou gone hiding
My Love, and leavest me alone with moaning?
Fleet as the deer Thou fleddest
When Thou hadst me sore stricken,
And Thou art gone. I follow Thee with outcry.

O Shepherds! you that wander
Away about the sheepfolds to the mountain,
If you should chance to see Him
For whom is my most longing
Pray tell Him how I sicken, grieve and perish.

In search of Him I cherish
I will away o'er mountains, shores of ocean;
No flowers will I gather,
No wild beast shall dismay me,
And I will fare through fastnesses and frontiers.

Ye woods and crowding thickets
Forested by the hand of the Beloved,
And ye, O greening meadows,
All starry-pied with blossom,
Say if His way has lain thro' your pleasaunces.

THE CREATURES REPLY

A thousand graces shedding,
He passed with hurrying feet these very woodlands,
And but with turning on them
Well-pleased eyes, He left them drest in beauty.

THE BRIDE

Ah! Who is there can heal me?
Thou once for all accomplish Thy self-giving.
Trouble no more to send me
Henceforward any envoy
That skilleth not to tell me Him I long for.

All whosoever dally
Come gossiping anent Thy countless beauties
And more and more they hurt me
And leave me nearer dying,
Babbling some whit of what it is they long for.

Nay how, how dost thou linger,
O Life! Not living on thy sovran victual,
With drain upon thy vitals
Of arrows in thee planted
By every thought thou hadst of the Beloved?

Why, since Thou hast so wounded
This heart of mine, why hast Thou never healéd?
And since Thyself did steal it
Why dereliçt dost leave it
Nor carry off the booty of Thy thieving?

Ease my tormented craving
Since none is else that skilleth to undo it;
And let mine eyes behold Thee
Since Thou their light wast ever
And unto Thee alone I will to keep them.

Unveil to me Thy presence
And let the vision of Thy beauty kill me.
Consider love's distemper,
How 'tis allayed by nothing
If not the face and presence of the loved one.

O Thou crystalline well-spring!
That in Thy silver pools portray Thou deignedst
Here now those eyes I long for
And keep with me too dimly yet most inly.
Take them away, Beloved,
For I go flying.

THE BRIDEGROOM

Fly away, my ring-dove.
Lo! how the stricken quarry
Looming upon the mountain
Takes freshness from the fanning of thy pinions.

THE BRIDE

My Love, He is the mountains,
He is the solitary vales of woodland,
The undiscovered islands,
The torrents' muted thunder,
The whispering of gentle airs love-laden.

He is night lull'd and soothéd
With expectation of the dawn's uprising;
He is becalméd music,
The lonely wild a-singing,
The evening feast renewing, love-enkindling.

Chase us the little foxes!
Behold you how our vineyard is in blossom!
The while we heap the roses
Let no live thing be seen upon the upland.

No more, thou withering North-East!
Come, South Wind, thou that love dost re-awaken
Breathe free about my garden
And set its spices flowing
So the Beloved shall feed among the lilies.

Look you, ye nymphs of Jewry,
So long as in the flowers and the rose-stems
The ambergris be fragrant
Tarry ye in the outskirts
And do not dare to come anigh our threshold.

Dear Heart, I prithee hide Thee,
And set Thy face at gaze upon the mountains;
No word, but see the comrades
Of her who fares thro' undiscovered islands.



THE BRIDEGROOM

You birds that lightly hover,
You lions, you fleet bucks, you hinds a-gambol,
Mountains and vales, and rivers,
With waters, winds and ardours,
You terrors of the night that prowl unsleeping,

By tender-moving lyres
And by the song of Sirens I conjure you
To put away your vexing .
Nor touch the wall, that so the Bride sleep safer.

Gone is she to the Bridegroom
Into the garden of her dear desiring
And with heartsease reclineth
Her neck at rest on the True Love's embraces.

Beneath the apple tree
Thy troth to me was covenanted, plighted:
To thee I gave my hand there
And where thy mother fell wast thou uplifted.

THE BRIDE

Our bed is all of flowers
With lions' dens hemmed in, and purple-curtain'd,
Of peace is all its fabric,
Its coronal a thousand golden bucklers.

Along the track of Thy footsteps
Young maidens mend their pace and come a-coursing,
Take fire from Thy sparkling
And drain Thy olden vintage,
Inhale, exhale the balsam of Thy Godhead.

In the most inmost wine-store
Of my Belovéd drank I, and once issued
Thereout to this wide country,
Nothing I knew whatever
And lost the flock that erst I followed after.

There gave me He His bosom,
There taught He me the science full of savour,
And in return I gave Him
My whole self, nothing keeping,
Myself to be His Bride I covenanted.

My soul He hath appointed
And all my substance to His loyal service,
So now no flock I pasture
Nor have I else employment
Since in His love alone is all my practice.

So that, it on the common
I be not seen or met with any longer,
Anent my loss you'll gather
How wandering love-lorn
I lost myself, and this is utter finding.

From flowers and young emeralds
We gather in the dewy cool of morning
We will entwine those garlands
That in Thy love best flourish ;
One lock of mine shall bind them.

Ah me! that one lock only
Which Thou didst notice on my neck a-waving.
My neck! and Thou didst ponder
And so enmeshed, didst crave me
And in one eye of me wast deeply wounded.

When Thou didst look upon me
Thine eyes in me imprinted Thine own graces
Wherefore Thou didst endear me
And therefore mine were worthy
To worship that in Thee which they discovered.

Nay! do not disregard me,
That Thou hast found my colour somewhat swarthy.
Thou mayest indeed admire me
Since e'er Thou lookedst on me
For in me Thy regard left grace and beauty.

THE BRIDEGROOM

It is the silvery ring-dove
Returning to the Ark with branch of olive,
It is the cooing turtle
Her mate desired dearly
Has found upon the lawns uprisen from bathing.

In solitude she tarried
And in the solitude her nest she builded;
In solitude her loved one,
And He alone, her guided
Himself in solitude for love a-bleeding.

THE BRIDE

Love, let us joy together
And go away to gaze upon Thy beauty
To the mount, to the hillside,
And to the thicket enter deeper, deeper.

We will away thenafter
To the deep secret caverns of the rock-land;
There will we enter
And taste the sweet first-pressing of pomegranates.

There wilt Thou show me
That which my soul stretch'd out to,
And after that wilt give me,
Oh then and there, my Life Thou,
That which the other day Thou gavest, gavest.

The breeze's breath,
Sweet Philomel her song,
The grove her delicate poise when night is flawless,
With flame that burns away withouten pain.

All this was seen of no one
Nor did Aminadab put in appearance,
The siege-ring slackened,
The cavalry dismounted, seeing water.



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